ArtsPraxis
Volume 10 Issue 2

Rehearsing Self-Advocacy: An Experiential Workshop for Theatre Educators

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ABSTRACT

In the spring of 2023, I was one of three graduate student co-organizers of the 2023 NYU Educational Theatre Forum: Collective Visioning. As I read through the enriching and diverse slate of workshops and presentations being offered, I found myself wanting to offer an opportunity for Forum attendees, who were largely early career theatre educators, to both engage with one another in a playful and community-building manner, and to have space to practice advocating for the unique skills they bring to the table. Therefore, I created a workshop entitled "Advocating for Your Work through Creative Play," an interactive, collaborative experience that used techniques grounded in improvisational theatre and personal storytelling to help participants practice articulating why they are uniquely qualified to do what it is they do. The workshop culminated in participants giving creative elevator pitches about their work and experiences.

BACKGROUND

In the nearly eight years that I have been teaching in the performing arts, I have found that articulating what it is that I do and why often feels like a stressful task. Conversations about that topic—why performing arts education is important and why I chose to do it—often arise in high stakes situations, when we are asking for funding, defending an arts program against budget cuts, or trying to justify the choice to major in theatre to skeptical family members. I think most people who work in the arts (let alone read a journal called *ArtsPraxis*) understand the mix of gravity, panic, and fatigue that often accompanies both advocating for our work and looking for work opportunities.

I created the workshop "Advocating for Your Work through Creative Play" to answer this question: *how could I use the tenets of improvisation, which fosters experimentation and playfulness, to help theatre teachers become stronger advocates for their work?* I facilitated this workshop at the 2023 NYU Educational Theatre Forum, a free professional development opportunity for New York-based theatre educators that I organized with two of my fellow graduate students at NYU. I wanted to give Forum attendees an opportunity to playfully practice advocating for their work and experimenting with their elevator pitches in a low-stakes environment. The professional development opportunities I have attended in the field of educational theatre have often lacked a sense of play. Perhaps that is because I was entering the field as the COVID-19 pandemic was hitting and as our industry was finally seeking to uproot historical, systemic inequalities. For this workshop, though, rather than approaching the concept of an elevator pitch with elevated cortisol levels, I hoped to foster an environment of curiosity, experimentation, and playful vulnerability that would allow attendees to discover new ways to advocate for themselves.

I offer this reflection on my workshop in order to consider the benefits of equipping arts educators with an improv mindset and to offer my fellow practitioners ideas about scaffolding vulnerability and psychological safety into applied improvisation experiences. This article does not present a case study; rather, I chronicle my intentions, design, and implementation of a workshop I created in hopes of equipping arts educators with concrete strategies to advocate for their practice. I seek

to illuminate how I practically implement theories behind the "improv mindset" in real time.

WHY IMPROV WITH TEACHERS?

Improvisation experts often identify the following aspects as key to successful improv: trust of self, trust of collaborators, building on others' ideas, spontaneity, and an embrace of failure. Combining those elements allows improv to quickly nurture vulnerability, collegiality, and trust. Furthermore, all of those aspects of an improv mindset can help educators become more agile and effective in the classroom. These are all elements I wanted to infuse into my workshop in order to foster a climate of risk-taking and creativity among the participants.

Participants

The people who attended my workshop were all theatre educators. They were largely early in their careers and were enrolled in educational theatre graduate programs at New York University or City College of New York. A few participants were also full-time K-12 drama teachers in New York City public schools. One participant was a faculty member in the Program in Educational Theatre at NYU with many decades of teaching experience and is a professor and mentor of mine. Fourteen participants used she/her pronouns and one participant used they/them pronouns.

Despite all the participants in my workshop being theatre educators, some of them were hesitant about improvisation. I have encountered many theatre practitioners who find comfort in order and in knowing what to do. They therefore balk when the word "improv" comes up (I was one of those people—I was a musical theatre devotee who loved the precision of the form and was too afraid to try improvisation until after college). But I have come to find comfort in improv because it helps me try on ideas or experiment with ways of being, and then quickly shed them if they don't work.

Making mistakes and learning on our feet—learning experientially—have long been at the heart of improvisational theatre practice. Improv pioneer Keith Johnstone wrote in 1999 that "real learning means getting it wrong'… You could memorize the instructions for how to walk on stilts, but you'd still have to learn by falling off" (p. 61).

Image 1: In this image, participants in the "Advocating for Your Work through Creative Play" workshop engage in a circle activity.

I felt that improv provided an excellent framework for theatre educators to experiment with their elevator pitches because the improv mindset can counteract the feelings of having to advocate for yourself and your work feeling high stakes.

The Improv Mindset

I mentioned that improvisation experts emphasize trusting oneself, trusting one's collaborators, building on each other's ideas, being spontaneous, and embracing failure as key to successful improvisation. Internalizing all of these elements allows one to adopt an *improv mindset*.

1. *Self trust:* Improvisational pioneer Keith Johnstone emphasized the central importance of trusting oneself in his seminal work *Impro* (1987) when he argued that, "an artist has to accept what his imagination gives him, or screw up his talent" (p. 307). Improvisation expert (and my professional mentor) Jessia Hoffman says that "what seems obvious to you could look like creative brilliance to others" (Hoffman, 2022). Hoffman's stance on people's innate creative brilliance is in line with Johnstone's belief that being imaginative occurs "'effortlessly,' and

'choicelessly… [an improviser] doesn't have to *do* anything in order to imagine, any more than he needs to *do* anything in order to relax or perceive" (1987, p. 342). Trusting oneself involves putting the inner critic on hold, as corporate improvisation coach Karen Hough puts it (Hough, 2011, p. 11). Self trust in improv means believing that what you bring to the table is enough.

2. *Trust of collaborators:* Hough writes that an inherent part of improv is being able to rely on others. According to Hough, improv is "a group of people collaborating for a unified outcome. Someone always has your back, and there's always another set of brains on the job" (Hough, 2011, p. 82). Johnstone also underlines the value of teamwork in improv, positing that, "combining the imagination of two people which would be additive, rather than subtractive" (Johnstone, 1987, p. 64). Hoffman encourages her improv students to explicitly adopt this mindset of trust by telling them that, "your partner is the most brilliant improviser in the world" (Hoffman, 2022). Hoffman often says this in introductory improvisation workshops where the vast majority of participants are inexperienced in improv. This directive often elicits giggles from participants because of the discrepancy in their partner's improv experience and Hoffman's claim that everyone in the room is one of the world's best improvisers. But this humorous instruction allows participants to view each other with generosity and trust one another's offers.

3. *Building on each other's ideas:* Kelly Leonard, a longtime producer at The Second City, has said that "through collective creative acts we discover all kinds of truths… that you wouldn't create on your own" (PodWiz). Collective creation in improv is best summed up in the refrain "yes, and. " Saying "yes, and" accepting an offer and then building upon it. For example, say your scene partner enters the stage miming that they are holding something small and delicate in their hand and says, "Look at this tiny hedgehog I'm holding!" If you wanted to *yes, and* their offer, you might say, "How wonderful! You've wanted a hedgehog since you were a kid!" If you were to *block* their offer (an improv term for denying the reality that was just offered to you), you might say, "How could you be so dumb? That's not a

hedgehog, it's a diamond bracelet. " Dudeck and McClure (2021) expand the concept "yes, and" as an "attitude to life—an openness to seeing everything as an offer (including setbacks and mistakes) and committing to build on those offers; a willingness to engage in responsive listening and to be altered by what you hear" (Dudeck & McClure, eds., 2021, p. 4).

4. *Being spontaneous:* Spontaneity is a habit of mind that arts educators often have to embrace. Dudeck & McClure posit that "accepting stability as an illusion, transformation as inevitable, and uncertainty as an opportunity to learn, interact, create, and take action" is a key tenet of improvisation (Dudeck & McClure, eds., 2021, p. 4). McDermott and Simpson (2018) articulate some of the benefits of engaging in improv practice, including "an ability to be comfortable with uncertainty" and "a belief that everything happening around you is a valuable part of the process" (p. xiv). Adopting an improv mindset lets us playfully practice curiosity, listening, and presence.

5. *Embracing failure:* Combining the previous four elements within an ensemble fosters an environment in which people feel safer about taking risks and making mistakes than they usually do in the real world. When participants trust themselves and know that their collaborators will accept and build on the ideas they spontaneously offer, they feel more confident to brush off mistakes and learn from the information they gleaned from those mistakes.

Adopting an improv mindset requires practice. I wanted my workshop to be a space where participants could practice putting these theoretical tenets of improv into practice. Melissa Carter, the Senior Director for Global Spiritual Life at NYU, has articulated the importance of providing space for "embodied practice and inviting a sense of curiosity that's playful" and for students to "practice being who they are" (Fields, 2023). To practice being who we are implies that we have not figured it out yet, that we can invite mistakes as part of the process of becoming ourselves. Though Carter was speaking about guiding undergraduate students through listening exercises and not about improv, I believe that improv is the ultimate "embodied practice" that is curious, playful, and

can rewire our brains to embrace mistakes as inevitable and necessary parts of the learning process, rather than something shameful.

SCAFFOLDING VULNERABILITY

In order to make participants feel at ease yet energized and ready to share what could be the emotional stories of what motivates them as arts educators, I wanted to establish psychological safety in the room and scaffold vulnerability. My workshop design was majorly influenced by my mentor, Jessia Hoffman, as well as the work of applied theatre practitioner Christine Poulter.

Establishing Psychological Safety

The first exercise I facilitated in my workshop was focused on establishing a playful environment and getting participants to trust their innate creative brilliance. This activity is called Three Things, which I learned from Hoffman. Participants stand in a circle, and one person passes a category that has at least three things in it to the person to their left. The person receiving the category then energetically says the first three things that come to mind when they hear that category, but those things do not have to be factually correct. For example, if I receive the category “things that are orange,” I could respond, “pumpkins, Garfield the cat, and oranges!” Those answers are correct in the traditional sense. But I could also say, “zucchinis, Snoopy the dog, and oranges!” Even though only one of those responses is technically correct, what matters in this game is trusting the first thing that comes out of your mouth. As the categories get passed around the circle, the other participants chant the numbers 1, 2, and 3 as well as the title of the game with an energizing hand gesture so that everyone stays engaged.

As with any applied theatre exercise, Three Things is not just about the structure of the exercise: whether it successfully gets participants to feel relaxed and trust themselves has a lot to do with the way one facilitates this exercise. I pepper transparent lessons about what the exercise is teaching us throughout my facilitation. I learned this technique of embedding takeaways as participants’ walls come down from Hoffman. Hoffman is an exceptional improv performer and facilitator: I have watched her facilitate a room of hundreds of ambitious attorneys through exercises that had law firm partners and early career

associates alike laughing and telling stories together. I have also seen Hoffman give colleagues who joined companies remotely during the darkest days of the COVID-19 pandemic concrete strategies to build genuine relationships. She does this by cultivating psychological safety, a concept that has its roots in the organizational change research of the 1960s (Schein & Bennis, 1965). Amy Edmondson, a leading researcher of psychological safety at Harvard Business School, defines psychological safety as “a climate in which people feel free to express relevant thoughts and feelings without fear of being penalized” (Edmondson, 2012). I want to be clear that I am intentionally referring to the concept of *psychological safety* and not *safe spaces*, a concept I am not sure actually exists (but that is a topic for another article). In Three Things, players are welcome to offer answers to the category they are given that are not “relevant” in a traditional sense—wrong answers are welcome. But these “wrong answers” are actually fully relevant to the task at hand, which is establishing sharing ideas and not filtering ourselves as a celebrated norm. When one person offers Snoopy as an answer to “three things that are orange,” everyone laughs, and then we move on. We establish psychological safety by normalizing making mistakes.

Playing Big

Establishing psychological safety is a key step in getting participants to be comfortable with making bold choices with their improvisations: what Hoffman calls “playing big. ” Arts teachers often have to adapt to scenarios that are less than ideal, whether that be not knowing whether you will have a budget for the high school play or having to rehearse in the gym where basketball practice is going on simultaneously (that has happened to me). Additionally, if the participants in the workshop hold marginalized identities—for example, none of the participants were cisgender men. As people who hold those identities, we have learned to be responsive, flexible, and creative. In other words, the teachers in this room were already experts at adapting to unexpected scenarios, a strength that is key to success in improvisation.

However, needing to constantly adapt can also cause fatigue. In my experience having to constantly be on high alert and ready to change plans at a moment’s notice have made me want to take up less space, be less ambitious—to play small. I learned from Hoffman that Three Things is an excellent exercise to give participants permission to play

big because players are encouraged to not filter themselves and to tap into self trust. Whatever answers a player gives in response to the category they receive is accepted and then affirmed by the group's chanting.

Low, Medium, and High Focus

When I design interactive workshops like this, I build the group, to borrow a phrase from Christine Poulter, by moving from what she calls low focus to high focus exercises (Poulter, 2018, p. 8). That might look like moving from partnered exercises where each participant is only "playing to an audience of one" (p. 10), and then gradually building up to a few participants sharing the focus of a large audience. My participants were all theatre people and educators, two groups that tend to be comfortable holding the gaze of an audience. Because I had that prior information about my workshop participants, I felt comfortable introducing Three Things, a relatively high-focus game in which everyone in the circle is watching two people at once, early in the session.

Image 2: In this image, workshop participants are working in small groups, an example of how to modify group size to reduce the focus on individual participants as they share ideas.

For the actual rehearsal of improvised elevator pitches, though, I transitioned to low- and medium-focus activities. While the beginning of the workshop was designed to energize participants and build psychological safety, the rest of the workshop was intended to give participants time to generate material that they could use to advocate for themselves and their work. The rest of the exercises involved telling personal stories, so I used low- and medium-focus exercises both so that participants only had to be vulnerable with a few other participants, and for the pragmatic issue of giving everyone enough time to tell their stories.

REHEARSING SELF-ADVOCACY

Identifying Personal Strengths

I transitioned into the self-advocacy part of the workshop with another exercise I learned from Hoffman called "What Do You Like About Yourself?" It is a simple, partnered exercise: Partner A asks Partner B, "What do you like about yourself?" Partner B responds with something they truly like about themself, related to the arts or not (e. g. "I like that I'm great at cooking pasta Bolognese," "I like that I can sing all the parts from *Phantom of the Opera* from memory"). Partner A then affirms that statement, e. g. "Yeah, you make an amazing Bolognese sauce!" Partner A asks, "What else do you like about yourself?" and the cycle goes on until I cue the partners to switch. At the end of the exercise, I asked participants to write down something they had said they liked about themselves that surprised them; I wanted them to have tangible takeaways to refer back to in their next job interview or grant application.

I assumed that teachers who took time out of their weekends to attend a voluntary professional development experience like the NYU Forum are all reflective practitioners who want to become better educators and better artists. That quest for self-improvement is necessary for being a good teacher, but it can involve lots of self-criticism without taking time to recognize one's strengths. In our debrief after this exercise, I encouraged participants to practice sharing their strengths with colleagues and collaborators so that they would have a community who knows what unique capacities they bring to the table.

Delivery and body language are also important in this exercise. I encouraged participants to speak with confidence as they stated the

things they liked about themselves. I modeled standing up straight, making eye contact, and not using an apologetic or questioning tone when stating something like, “I like that I am good at showing up for my friends. ” Encouraging participants to own their strengths was particularly important to me considering that most of the participants were women. Despite findings that self-promotion has been found to be important professionally for people of all genders (Rudman, 1998), women tend to underestimate their abilities and performance due to a variety of sociological factors (Kay & Shipman, 2014). To call back to Carter (Fields, 2023), it is therefore important for people of marginalized gender identities to have space to practice.

Infusing Laughter into Self-Advocacy

The final series of exercises in my workshop involved giving participants the chance to improvise elevator pitches for projects they were currently working on or wanted to work on, or more traditional elevator pitches à la a job interview. Participants were given two minutes to describe in detail how they got to where they are in their careers, and then advocate for why they are perfect for the particular job/project they wanted to practice pitching for. This was a medium-focus exercise in which each participant had one or two partners. After everyone had done that, they had to advocate for themselves again, but with entirely new content: if they had told stories or highlighted particular strengths, they had to throw those out and use new ones. We often get stuck in one narrative version of who we are, so this exercise forced participants to frame themselves in new ways.

The next exercise was inspired by Random Word Generator, an exercise I have watched Hoffman facilitate via Zoom. For the in-person version of this game, I had participants write down random words on index cards (one word per card). Then, as the participants gave their elevator pitches a third time, their partners had two choices. They could either flash the index cards with words at the speaker, and the speaker would have to incorporate that word into their pitch somehow. (Using metaphors and similes quickly became a useful tool.) Or, because everyone in the room was a theatre person, the partner who was not speaking could make a bold physical choice à la Image Theatre (Boal, 1995) that the speaker would have to incorporate. All of this required a *yes, and* attitude on behalf of the speaker.

Laughter is what I remember most from this pitch exercise. In my

experience, elevator pitch coaching usually does not elicit so many giggles or a sense of playfulness. But by throwing these unexpected and often goofy curveballs at the speaker, participants were able to disrupt the usual narratives they tell about themselves and discover creative ways to advocate for themselves.

At the end of the workshop, I encouraged participants to follow up with the people they had been paired with throughout the workshop and share what stood out to them about each other's stories. Canning, Lee, and Warner (2019) emphasize the importance of "collaboration and knowledge sharing" (p. 110) between graduate school students and instructors. This workshops offered space for the participants, who have varying levels of professional experience, to help each other communicate the importance of their work by providing fresh perspectives.

AN AREA FOR GROWTH: ASSESSMENT

I did not capture feedback from participants, primarily because I was busy coordinating the larger Educational Theatre Forum where I presented this workshop, and building in assessment grounded in data frankly slipped my mind. Snyder-Young's excellent 2018 article about assessment wryly articulates that applied theatre practitioners often "on the fumes of caffeine and adrenaline" (p. 85) during a project; as a volunteer student organizer of this Forum as well as a facilitator, Snyder-Young's description captures the state I was in during the weekend that I held this workshop. In the future, I might give participants an exit ticket that asks a question like "What is one thing you'll take away from this workshop?" or "What is the most significant change that has occurred?" as Snyder-Young suggests (p. 85). I was assessing participants' comfort and growth during the workshop by observing their body language and facial expressions, and asking debrief questions. If I could go back in time, I would have liked to record what some participants shared during those debriefs or sent out a survey after the workshop to see whether participants used any of the tactics we explored in order to advocate for their work in new ways.

CONCLUSION

This workshop harnessed the power of improvisational theatre to establish a nurturing and experimental environment for participants to practice advocating for their artistic and educational theatre work. I established an environment of psychological safety by making silliness and risk taking expected norms. This approach encouraged the participants to identify and celebrate their unique strengths, fostering the kind of self-confidence needed in a field where self-promotion is essential yet often challenging. It is vital to provide opportunities for early career educators and graduate students studying theatre education to reflect on why it is that they do what they do, what motivates them, and then practice articulating what they bring to the table. Canning, Lee, and Warner (2019) note that, “Anecdotes of underrepresented students being asked to ‘volunteer’ their time for teaching and service are abundant in our field, and their labor is often taken for granted. And, many end up presenting their work prematurely to the detriment of their long-term success” (p. 107). The same could be said of artists, and of early career artist-educators. Too often, arts educators get thrown in the deep end without adequate space for reflection.

Bringing an improv mindset to these reflections and collaboratively practicing our advocacy with other arts educators has multiple benefits. Infusing humor and unpredictability into the process of crafting elevator pitches showed participants that advocating for one's work can be a joyous and transformative experience. Ultimately, it underlined the importance of incorporating playfulness and curiosity into professional development, empowering educators to confidently champion the value of arts education and their roles within it. I hope that my reflection on this workshop will encourage arts educators to build professional support networks encourage each other to infuse their teaching practice with an improviser’s mindset.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Jenks, S. (2023). Rehearsing self-advocacy: An experiential workshop for theatre educators. *ArtsPraxis, 10* (2), pp. 1-15.

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